

Latif Nasser
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THE GREAT DIVIDE, or HOW AN OBSCURE DIAGNOSIS FROM
COLONIAL AFRICA ENDED UP IN *PLAYBOY* MAGAZINE

This is the story of the meteoric rise of an idea. An intellectual genealogy of a powerful way to explain human difference. The idea is easy to trace - in this case, through three works by three authors over three consecutive years. In this grand game of broken telephone, though, the idea grows distorted: from the diagnosis of a single person to a sweeping narrative of all humanity; from a time- and place-specific observation to a timeless and universal gloss on social change; from the clinical language of a West African mental hospital to the pop-cultural metaphysics of *Playboy* magazine. What follows is the story of ‘the Great Divide.’

Abeokuta, Nigeria, circa January 1958. A Nigerian man – unmarried, bespectacled, seemingly healthy – approached the Aro Hospital for Nervous and Mental Diseases. This 21-year-old male, whose case history labels him only as “S.A.”, studied at the local Teacher Training College. Whereas S.A. was typically a model student – he had never ranked below 4th in a class of 30 – he now complained of a number of bodily ailments that hampered his ability to study. For the last three months, he told the doctor, his scalp felt tender, he was weak, and his legs pained him whenever he spoke. Worst of all, he felt, was his inability to assimilate anything he read, and, as well, to stay awake during lectures. His condition forced him to quit school. His doctor noted that S.A. “felt

that since he could not learn any more, he was useless.” S.A. became so glum and depressed that he sometimes contemplated suicide.¹

S.A. was by no means alone. Many other students ranging in age from 15 to 30 checked themselves into the Aro Hospital, anxious about conditions that hindered their scholarly abilities. Some came from the local secondary school; others were students at the nearby University College, Ibadan. Many of their concerns were idiosyncratic. One complained of “excessive perspiration” and “foul breath.” Another noted that he was too dizzy to ride his bicycle to school. A third confessed that he inadvertently had an orgasm after he was handed an examination. “During the first examination paper, I passed out semen while I was writing. I wasn’t able to write at all; I was oblivious of my surroundings.”

All the men, though, had one symptom in common.² A medical officer at the Aro Hospital remarked, “If a young man comes in with glasses and European dress, you may be sure that he will complain of ... inability to read.” Many of the young men spoke at length about their plight. One anonymous man chronicled how his illness felt to him:

When I read I don’t assimilate anything, and when they
teach me my mind will not take it in. I forget the word
that I am supposed to be looking up in the dictionary as I
am leafing the pages. If I pick up a book it seems that a
boy of five is looking at it, the letters don’t mean
anything. I have forgotten all that I learned; it is as if I had no
past.

¹ All details and quotations in this section come from: Raymond Prince, “The ‘Brain Fag’ Syndrome in Nigerian Students,” *Journal of Mental Science* 106 (April 1960): 559-570. See also, Raymond Prince, “Report from Nigeria. Concerning a “brain-fag” syndrome ... Letter of January 24th, 1959” *Review and Newsletter / Transcultural Research in Mental Health Problems* 6 (July 1959): 40-41.

² The fact that all of those suffering ‘brain fag’ were men tells more about the Nigerian education system at the time than it does about anything else. Scholar Benedicta Egbo wrote, in *Gender, Literacy, and Life Chances in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cromwell, 2000), that in the late 1950s, “girls remained under-represented since the percentage of those in school ... was much smaller than that of boys enrolled in school.”

Some blamed their newly developed disability on their minds. “I will sit down to read but I am just helpless, my mind isn’t there.” Others blamed their eyes. “When I look at writing there is a strain across my eyes and my eyes are dim.” All agreed, however, that their problems stemmed from “too much study,” emphasizing that their difficulty reading struck at a particularly stressful time – after failing an exam, for instance, or upon returning from sick leave. Most of the men, S. A. included, were treated with doses of anti-psychotic pharmaceuticals and/or rounds of electro-shock therapy.

The psychiatrist who oversaw these cases was a soft-spoken Canadian named Raymond Prince. Prince, aged 33, arrived in Abeokuta in 1957, while British colonial authorities were still constructing the Aro Hospital.³

After close scrutiny of ten of these students, Prince published a short paper about them. (Ironic that Prince’s patients were physically incapable of reading his account of them.) Prince published in the July 1959 issue of the *Review and Newsletter / Transcultural Research in Mental Health Problems* (henceforth: *Transcultural Research*), a journal edited, mimeographed and mailed out of McGill’s Department of Psychiatry. “I have found here,” Prince began his article, “a rather interesting syndrome that occurs in students...” He dubbed the affliction ‘brain fag’ (fag being short for fatigue), noting that was what the students called it.⁴

³ Raymond Prince, *Why this Ecstasy? Reflections on my Life with Madmen*. Montreal, Avmor Art and Cultural Foundation, 2010. See “Chapter XII: Aro Hospital, Abeokuta.”

⁴ Raymond H. Prince, “Report from Nigeria ...” *Review and Newsletter / Transcultural Research in Mental Health Problems* 6 (July 1959): 40-41. The journal was later known as the *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review*. In the late 1950s, the journal counted among its overseers all-star academics such as Margaret Mead and Donald Ewen Cameron.

The major puzzle, of course, was the syndrome's root cause. In follow-up articles published later, Prince presented a number of potential etiologies for this increasingly common sickness.⁵

Perhaps, Prince considered, the students themselves were to blame. Although Prince maintained that “genetic elements are not of major importance,” he did investigate each student’s “intellectual abilities.” After assessing each patient’s mental faculties – for instance, three were deemed “above average,” four “average,” and one “dull” - Prince determined that “the syndrome was not related to intelligence.” Similarly, whereas many Nigerian teachers blamed students’ “faulty study habits” – students typically spent long hours cramming, constantly “cracking” their necks - Prince dismissed this possible cause, too. “These ‘faulty study habits’ are a further manifestation of the difficulty rather than the cause.” The problem, Prince seemed to think, was much bigger than the students themselves.⁶

Prince zoomed out to consider the students’ backgrounds. Most students were the “first generation literate” in their family, if not their whole community. A lot was riding on their education. If the student succeeded, he and his family were guaranteed a rise up the social ladder. In Prince’s words, “Because of this ‘family affair’ aspect of education, the student is very much the centre of attention and the burden of family reputation and prestige often rests upon his shoulders.” (This familial pressure manifested itself starkly. For instance, one 18-year-old student refused to go back to his family and village because he “could

⁵ Follow-up papers: “The ‘Brain Fag’ Syndrome in Nigerian Students,” in *The Journal of Mental Science* 106 (April 1960): 559-570. And “Functional Symptoms associated with study in Nigerian Students,” in *The West African Journal of Medicine* 11 (Oct 1962): 198-206.

⁶ This paragraph, and the rest that follow in this section, all quote Raymond Prince, “The ‘Brain Fag’ Syndrome in Nigerian Students,” *The Journal of Mental Science* 106 (April 1960): 559-570.

no longer be content to live among illiterates.”) After considering this hypothesis, however, Prince rejected it because “the patients themselves seem to minimize these factors.”

Prince next turned to the school system for clues. Every school in Abeokuta was modeled on the British education system. (For instance, the University College Ibadan was meant to emulate the University College London.) Not only were classes conducted entirely in English – usually not the students’ first language – but also grades were based almost wholly on one standardized exam taken at the end of the school year. An academic calendar hardly easy on the nerves. That said, why didn’t this happen to all students? Prince continued his search.

Prince gave lip-service to other potential explanations – sleep disorders, alcohol and drug addiction, depression. He also noted that most of his patients wore glasses, perhaps alluding to eye conditions (or even an inept local lens-grinder). Yet, in the end, Prince rejected all of these as causes. In his initial article on ‘brain fag’ and in every follow-up article, Prince asserted a single clear reason for the syndrome.

So what *did* Prince blame for the Nigerian students’ “intellectual and sensory difficulties”? How *did* he elucidate what he saw to be the fundamental clash between the character of the Nigerian student and, as he put it, “the written word and the student life”?

For his answer, Prince blamed culture. Drawing on his psychoanalytic training, Prince began with an evaluation of Southern Nigerian child rearing practices: the “prolonged period of breast feeding,” the child’s “long period of ‘uterine’ existence on his mother’s back”, even the permissive style of toilet

training. From these observations, Prince extrapolated a more sweeping pronouncement of “the intense oral orientation of the Nigerian at his present level of development.” One of the resultant oral character traits, according to Prince, was a Nigerian tendency to be highly dependent on others. This “demanding quality,” as he put it, was at odds with the individualism and the isolation (both anal character traits) that Western methods of education demand. Educating Nigerians to a British standard, Prince seemed to say, was like fitting a square peg into a round hole; Nigerians were just too oral to handle the written word.

The reason Raymond Prince published his paper on ‘brain fag’ – his first article as a professional psychiatrist – in the McGill journal *Transcultural Research* is quite simple. As a medical student, he got much of his clinical experience at an institution run by McGill’s Department of Psychiatry. This institution, known as the Allan Memorial Institute, was housed in a 19th century mansion (formerly known as Ravenscrag) just a short walk from the academic department. Prince published here because, well, nobody anywhere else knew who he was. In fact, his entire time in Nigeria, Prince ping-ponged back and forth across the Atlantic every few years to lecture at the Allan. The version of his ‘brain fag’ paper published in the internationally renowned *Journal of Mental Science* bore his institutional affiliation as both “Medical Officer (Psych.), Aro Hospital” and “Lecturer, Allan Memorial Institute.”⁷

While at the Allan Memorial Institute, Prince befriended its director, the eminent Scottish-American psychiatrist Donald Ewen Cameron, then also head

⁷ Quotes and details from this section are all culled from: Raymond Prince, “The Central Intelligence Agency and the Origin of Transcultural Psychiatry at McGill University,” *Annals of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada* 28 (1995): 407-413.

of the World Psychiatric Association. Cameron was hard at work, developing his own cutting-edge research at the Institute on a process he called ‘psychic driving.’ Cameron was only able to conduct his studies because two years earlier, a real plum of a source of funding decided to generously bankroll his experiments with electro-convulsive therapy, psycho-pharmaceuticals, and looped audio recordings to the tune of \$69,000.

Cameron recommended Prince – and in particular Prince’s study on Yoruba healers – to his source, the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, who funded Prince a little more than \$17,000 and also bought him a Volkswagen. (To put this in perspective, Prince’s yearly salary in Nigeria was \$4,000.) Only years later did Prince learn that the organization who underwrote his research, Cameron’s research, the Allan Memorial Institute *and even* the newsletter *Transcultural Research* was a front organization for the Central Intelligence Agency. These were only some of the machinations of their 25-million-dollar projects Bluebird, Artichoke and MK-Ultra, together sharing the express goal of effectively controlling a person’s – probably a communist’s – mind. Prince would later write about his unwitting collaboration with the CIA.⁸

Distributed with CIA funds, the July 1959 issue of *Transcultural Research* – and Prince’s article in it – circulated to approximately 700 specialists in over forty countries.⁹

⁸ There are many detailed histories of these projects. Most relevant to Prince’s work is David H Price, “Buying a Piece of Anthropology: Human Ecology and Unwitting Anthropological Research for the CIA,” *Anthropology Today* 23 3 (June 2007): 8-13. Prince’s own writing on these projects is available here: Raymond Prince, “The Central Intelligence Agency and the Origin of Transcultural Psychiatry at McGill University,” *Annals of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada* 28 (1995): 407-413.

⁹ These figures were taken from the back cover of the July 1959 issue of *Transcultural Research*.

One of those specialists who read Raymond Prince's article was a South African psychiatrist named John Colin Carothers. Although by 1959 Carothers was eight years into his retirement in Portsmouth, England, he spent much of his free time reading and writing about African psychiatry. Most, if not all, of the articles that Carothers published drew on his decade in charge of East Africa's largest mental institution: Kenya's Mathari Mental Hospital.¹⁰

The story of Carothers's appointment as medical superintendent of the 500-plus bed institution tells much about the professionalism, or lack thereof, of these colonial institutions. In 1938, Carothers's predecessor, a British-trained psychiatrist named James Cobb, was appointed to the position. Cobb was seen even within the libertine European settler community of Nairobi as an eccentric. He was a personal friend of the Prince of Wales. He was an open homosexual. He was also a drunkard who was "given to arriving at the hospital late at night with his drinking companions, entertaining them by showing off the more interesting inmates." Cobb also famously had two pet lion cubs. One day it was reported, according to Carothers, that Cobb was "having sex with one of the animals." To top it all off, local authorities soon discovered that prior to running the Mathari Mental Hospital, Cobb had himself been treated in an English one. He was dismissed amidst scandal. Scrambling to save face, the colonial government found a temporary replacement: John Colin Carothers, a nearby district medical officer whose only training in mental health consisted of six one-hour psychology lectures during medical school. As soon as the Second World War broke out, the

¹⁰ The most valuable (albeit short) account of John Colin Carothers and his work at Mathari Mental Hospital is Megan Vaughan's *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Cambridge, 1991). In particular, see her chapter: "The Madman and the Medicine Men: Colonial Psychiatry and the Theory of Deculturation."

Colonial Office stopped its search for a qualified replacement. Carothers's 'temporary placement' lasted from 1938 to 1951.¹¹

Mostly due to his lack of formal training, Carothers never fit neatly into any single demarcated school of thought. Instead, his career reflected a mishmash of anthropometry, developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, and tropical medicine. His favorite research subject was the "neurophysiological basis of African thinking," which he also called the "African mind." Although his several overarching theses about this "normal African mentality" often contradicted one another, Carothers maintained that such a thing existed and was explicable:

Many attempts have been made to describe the African mentality ... apologetically – saying for example, 'This is the classical conception,' 'This is the popular stereotype,' or 'It has been said.' Such apologies are not so necessary; these classical conceptions are largely true today.

Carothers called his approach 'ethnopsychiatry.'¹²

Surprisingly, Carothers's brand of ethnopsychiatry flourished even outside the walls of the Mathari Mental Hospital. His writing was published in prestigious international journals such as *The Lancet*, *The British Medical Journal*, and *The Journal of Mental Science*. The 1948 issue of *Time* bears an article titled "In Sanest Africa" featuring Carothers's speculations about the prevalence of insanity in "Kenya Africans" versus that in "Massachusetts Negroes." Nor did he stop after retiring. The nascent World Health Organization commissioned Carothers's 1954 monograph *The African Mind in Health and*

¹¹ See Jock McCulloch, *Colonial Psychiatry and 'The African Mind'* (Cambridge, 1995). Details and quotations in this paragraph are culled from his second chapter, "Psychiatry and Colonial Practice."

¹² Quotes are culled from *The African Mind in Health and Disease* (WHO, 1953). Carothers appropriated the term 'ethno-psychiatry' from Haitian psychiatrist Louis Mars. Although Mars's term dates back only to the 1940s, the tradition of cross-cultural psychiatry dates back earlier, at least to German psychiatrist Emile Kraepelin's 'ethnopsychology' ('Voelkerpsychologie') studies of Java, Ceylon, India and Singapore in 1904.

Disease. No less a luminary than Margaret Mead called it “a brave adventure into new and untried fields, a tremendous undertaking.”¹³

Just as Carothers carried on his publishing after his retirement, so too did he continue to work for the bureaucrats in the Colonial Office. For instance, in 1955 – two years before Prince’s arrival in Abeokuta – the British government commissioned Carothers to review and assess the psychiatric services available in Nigeria, including the Aro Hospital, then under construction.¹⁴

Arguably Carothers’s most infamous act was the help he gave to the colonial Governor of Kenya during the Mau Mau Emergency in the early 1950s. The governor, caught off guard by the uprising, called Carothers out of retirement to explain the rebels’ behavior and to advise policy. Carothers’s report was written in 1954, in the midst of the insurgency. In it, Carothers attempted to provide “solutions to this problem” of how best to “rehabilitate” those Kenyans who had taken secret oaths against the British. Omitting to mention a single legitimate political grievance, Carothers dwelt instead only on, as the title of the report indicated, “The Psychology of Mau Mau.” Carothers took a decisive position: “No cleansing oath is possible,” Carothers wrote, and many of the rebels “go far beyond all possibility of cleansing.” The report went on to advocate the forced detention of whole villages. “It is not to be expected that Kikuyu people would take kindly at first to such a departure from their traditional ... ways of living. But that is just why it could be valuable for them.” It is difficult to tell how closely, or even whether, colonial administrators read

¹³ Most of this information is drawn from McCulloch’s chapter “Towards a Theory of the African Mind.” The *Time* article – from Monday, June 7, 1948 – is available online here: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,854417,00.html>.

¹⁴ For a detailed description of what Carothers did in Nigeria, see Jonathan Sadowsky’s *Imperial Bedlam: Institutions of Madness in Colonial Southwest Nigeria*. (University of California Press, 1999). Carothers is featured heavily in the chapter on “Material Conditions and the Politics of Care.”

Carothers's report. In any case, the ensuing 'villagization' of the Kikuyu remains one of the most brutal episodes in all history.¹⁵

Five months after Raymond Prince's article blamed Nigerian students' mental breakdowns on their culture's peculiar "oral orientation," Carothers published an eerily similar article. In the December 1959 issue of the American journal *Psychiatry*, Carothers published the twelve-page essay "Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word." In it, he referred obliquely to a condition that sounded a lot like 'brain fag,' characterized by "lack of interest" and "fatigue" in the "Educated African." (Carothers felt the need to qualify the "Educated African" by adding parenthetically "using this term for even the comparatively low standard achieved by the average African schoolboy.") Consistently using the term 'African' as he did throughout his writing, Carothers amplified Prince's problem from a local concern in Abeokuta, Nigeria to a continental one. Carothers's explanation for this condition, too, resembled Prince's. The African schoolboy's "faculties," Carothers wrote, "are stifled by [his] culture."¹⁶

Carothers even used the same term as Prince to buttress his cultural explanation: "oral." Yet, whereas Prince used 'oral' in a Freudian sense – contrasting it with other forms of psychosexual development such as 'anal' or 'phallic' – Carothers's used the word in an entirely different way, contrasting it

¹⁵ J C Carothers, "The Psychology of Mau Mau," (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1954.) Much has been written about the 'intellectual construction' of the Mau Mau emergency, best of all is John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *Journal of African History* 31 3 (1990): 393-421. For broad hard-hitting histories of the Mau Mau uprising, see: Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (Henry Holt, 2005.) and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. (Norton, 2005.)

¹⁶ All quotations from this section not otherwise marked are from: J C Carothers, "Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word," *Psychiatry* 22 (Nov 1959): 307-320.

instead with 'literate.' Based on his own and others' studies of mental disorder in sub-Saharan Africa, Carothers emphasized the distinction between written communication and the spoken word. "Literacy ... or the lack of it," Carothers wrote, "plays an important part in shaping the minds of men and the patterns of their mental breakdown." Carothers got more specific. "In general ... rural Africans live largely in a world of sound ... whereas the Western European lives much more in a visual world ... [T]his difference is of fundamental importance for the development of thought." Carothers's idea, put a different way, was that all African culture was based on the ear and that all European culture was based on the eye and that this difference could explain all other differences between the two.

Carothers's thesis was clear, but his rationale was much less so. He provided an anecdote he hoped would be illustrative.

Some years ago my little son said, "Is there a word 'pirates,' Daddy?" When I replied in the affirmative he asked, "Are there pirates?" I said, "No not now; there used to be." He asked, "Is there a word 'pirates' now?" When I said, "Yes," he replied, "Then there must be pirates now." ... This attitude toward words ... also appears among non-literate societies in Africa."

What Carothers seemed to believe was that to Africans, words were revered as magical because they couldn't be tamed. But Europeans, whom Carothers thought predominantly used their eyes, could order and edit words at their whim, hence eventually experience rationality and scientific thought. An oral culture, by contrast, would, through "a host of constraints," "act insidiously in each society to curtail the ideation of its members."

A key to understanding Carothers's logic lies in a contribution he made to the journal *Transcultural Research* in February 1957, two years before it published Prince's article on 'brain fag.' One sentence in particular crystallizes

Carothers's mode of psychological analysis: "Ideally, I suppose, one should try to find examples of populations which are sharply divisible into two sections on the basis of some one cultural variable and one only, and then relate these to the psychiatric findings in each section." Which is to say, pick one difference between people – be it race, religion, sex, or some other marker – and use it to explain their mental capacities as well as all other differences between them. Literacy, in Carothers's 1959 article, was that cultural variable.¹⁷

In his paper, Carothers also included what he must have seen as a rousing hope for the oral world. He called for "the reawakening of dormant intellectual curiosity and ... a dawning recognition that it is man's prerogative to see the world with his own eyes." Carothers believed that the eye would eventually triumph over the ear.

Two years later, in a twist analogous to Prince writing medical articles about the illiterate, Carothers orally presented a version of his paper on the written word. His venue was the First Pan-African Psychiatric Conference, held at Abeokuta, Nigeria. Raymond Prince was in the audience.¹⁸

Sometime in 1960, an obscure middle-aged literature professor at the University of Toronto happened upon John Colin Carothers's article, "Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word."

Herbert Marshall McLuhan wrote his first book ten years before, a literary critique of Madison Avenue-era advertising. Somewhat aptly, the book –

¹⁷ John Colin Carothers, "Survey Response" *Review and Newsletter / Transcultural Research in Mental Health Problems* 2 (Feb 1957).

¹⁸ See the "First Pan-African Psychiatric Conference Report, 1961" edited by T. Adeoye Lambo, and published at Ibadan in 1962.

a blast against the age of mass production – sold only a few hundred copies. Those reviewers who did pay attention to it were not very kind. Reviewers found it “smart alecky,” filled with “bloodcurdling puns,” nothing but “tonnes of rich and purple baloney.” By 1960, McLuhan had been at work on his second book, tentatively titled *The Gutenberg Era*, for a decade, fifteen years longer than that if you consider how long he had been reading, writing and thinking about the book’s topic: the written word. Despite promises to editors and colleagues that he was nearing completion, McLuhan had written little, if any of it.¹⁹

A voracious reader, McLuhan read Carothers’s article and found it intellectually ravishing. Within the span of a month, he wrote, longhand, in uncharacteristically neat writing, the entire manuscript. Allegedly, he only decided to stop writing at page 399 because he liked how that number was divisible by 3. (McLuhan was a Roman Catholic convert obsessed with the Holy Trinity.) The University of Toronto Press published the book under McLuhan’s revised title: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. McLuhan organized the book as a kind of mosaic - a cryptic jumble of observations meant to be read in any order. Most of the observations were culled from his own glosses on Joyce, Blake, Shakespeare and others. McLuhan cites (and provides several-paragraph-long excerpts from) Carothers’s twelve-page article on fifteen pages throughout his text. Referring to Carothers, McLuhan wrote, “His great contribution has been to point to the breaking apart of the magical world of the ear and the neutral world of the eye ...”²⁰

¹⁹ Details and quotations from this paragraph are taken from W. Terrence Gordon’s biography *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding* (Basic Books, 1997.) In particular, see pages 155 through 185.

²⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962): 22.

In *Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan divided the entire history of European culture, and even more ambitiously, human sensory experience into four quasi-Hegelian phases: the first, oral tribal culture; the second, long-hand manuscript culture; the third, mass print culture; and fourth, the electronic age. Individuals living in each of these phases, McLuhan believed, have their own signature sensorium, that is, their own particular ratio of senses they depend on. According to McLuhan, the mode of communication a society uses determines its ratio, and this ratio determines its cognitive and cultural circumstances. Put another way, the way you communicate shapes the way you see, the way you hear, and ultimately, the way you think. In the way of looking at the world, the written word is not an indicator of civilization, but rather, the engine of it.

A panel headed by literary theorist Northrop Frye bestowed *Gutenberg Galaxy* with the prestigious Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction in 1962. Overnight, McLuhan and his ideas skyrocketed to fame both in and out of academia.

On the heels of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962 came a rash of scholarly books and essays appropriating the distinction between oral and literate cultures. These works speculated about the sweeping changes that accompanied the shift of the burden of communication from the ear to the eye. Far from limiting themselves to contemporary Africa, as Carothers did, these scholars applied the idea of the eye and the ear as easily to ancient Greece, medieval Germany, and 'traditional China.' The unoriginal titles of these works over the ensuing thirty years bore their arguments out clearly: "The Consequences of Literacy;" *Orality and Literacy*; *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its*

*Cultural Consequences; Literacy and Orality; Oral and Written Language: The Consequences for Cognitive Development ... You get the picture.*²¹

These authors – every stripe of academic from historians to cognitive scientists – made ambitious claims. For instance, in 1963, social anthropologist Jack Goody and literary scholar Ian Watt wrote “And so, not long after the widespread diffusion of writing throughout the Greek world ... they were impelled to a much more conscious, comparative and critical attitude to the accepted world picture and notably to the notions of God, the universe and the past.” Here, Goody and Watt seem to suggest that illiterate Greeks tended to believe everything whereas literate Greeks tended to question everything. Similarly, in 1963, classicist Eric Havelock speculated that “a state of mind which we shall conveniently label the ‘poetic’ or ‘Homeric’ or ‘oral’ state of mind ... constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to ... cause and effect.” Collectively, these scholars following McLuhan were (pejoratively) dubbed the ‘Great Divide’ scholars, after the dramatic distinction they perceived between literate and non-literate peoples.²²

Even more dramatic than the way *The Gutenberg Galaxy* got taken up in academia was the way McLuhan got taken up outside of it.

²¹ Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304-45; Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982; Eric Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*, 1982; David Olson and Nancy Torrance, *Literacy and Orality*, 1991; P M Greenfield, *Oral and Written Language: The Consequences for Cognitive Development in Africa, the United States and England*, 1973.

²² The first quotation is from Goody and Watt’s essay “The Consequences of Literacy” cited above. The second is from Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (Harvard University Press, 1963): 47.

In America, McLuhan transmogrified from an incomprehensible professor to a charismatic prophet. Within a few years of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan became, in the words of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “the hottest academic property around.” He coined a number of phrases, among them “the global village,” culled from *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. His devoted fans included not only prominent leftists like John Lennon, Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Woody Allen, and Timothy Leary, but also business executives at General Motors, IBM, and Bell Telephone who paid him for private consultations on their public image. The Canadian Prime Minister did the same, billing him as an “oracular opinionist.” McLuhan gave interviews to, and wrote articles for, *Fortune*, *Life*, *Esquire*, *Harper’s*, *McCall’s*, *Family Circle*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *TV Guide*, *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, and *Glamour* magazines.²³

According to one of his biographers, one McLuhan interview shone brighter than the rest – his 1969 interview with *Playboy* magazine. At one point, *Playboy* asked him a question that cut to the heart of the ‘great divide’ literature. “How can you be so sure,” the interviewer asked, “that this all occurred solely because of phonetic literacy – or, in fact, if it occurred at all?” McLuhan’s answer:

You don’t have to go back 3000 or 4000 years to see the process at work; in Africa today, a single generation of alphabetic literacy is enough to wrench the individual from the tribal web. When tribal man becomes phonetically literate, he may have an improved abstract intellectual grasp of the world, but most of the deeply emotional corporate family feeling is excised ... This division of sight and sound ... causes deep psychological effects, and he suffers a corresponding separation and impoverishment of his imaginative, emotional and sensory life.

²³ Details and quotations from this paragraph are taken from the preface to “Marshall McLuhan – A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media” Interview with Eric Norden. *Playboy* (March 1969).

McLuhan's description was highly detailed. He noted that literacy ripped (male) students from their social support structures, forced them to prioritize their abstract knowledge over their familial bonds, left them to suffer deep psychological effects hindering their ability to sense and feel. This description was so detailed, in fact, that McLuhan sounded like he was diagnosing a specific person, which is to say, one of the young Nigerian men at Aro Hospital.²⁴

McLuhan did not, however, intend to describe only S.A. He did not even intend to diagnose all young Nigerians, as Prince did. Nor did he intend to generalize about all non-literate cultures in his time, as Carothers did. Rather, the subject of McLuhan's book was everybody who has ever learned to read in the history of the world.

It's a simple trajectory. From Prince to Carothers to McLuhan. From an article published in July 1959 to another published in December 1959 to a book released in March 1962. All featured a similar argument: there are two homogeneous but discrete cultures – oral and non-oral; this fundamental division determines a culture's capacity to think; those in limbo between the two cultures manifest deep psychological effects.

So what about this mid-20th century idea is new? In fact, very little. European and American writers generalized about Africans long before the 1960s. The 'noble savage' stereotype, for instance, dates back to the seventeenth century. Even debates about acculturation and culture contact date back before

²⁴ "Marshall McLuhan – A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media" Interview with Eric Norden. *Playboy* (March 1969). (Later reprinted in *The Essential McLuhan*, edited by Eric McLuhan and F. Zingrone.)

the time of Columbus. Other historians of colonial African psychiatry, such as Megan Vaughan, have noted how often pathological mental conditions (in this case, brain fog) were over-extended to justify blanket generalizations of healthy Africans' minds. Even the notion of the written word as civilization incarnate predates McLuhan, back at least as far as the Puritans in 17th century New England.²⁵

What *is* interesting, though, is not *what* these men were saying so much as *when* they were saying it.

The year Prince and Carothers wrote their articles was also the year of Nigeria's political independence. A little more than ten years earlier, nationalist Nigerians convinced British colonial officials of one thing: the need for schools. A new country needs not only a cadre of educated indigenous elite to lead it, the argument went, but also citizens. And, of course, citizens need to be educated, citizens need to be literate. In this post-war period, many schools were founded. These included the University College, Ibadan where Prince's patients were students and the Royal College Nairobi, in Carothers's backyard. In the early 1950s, Nigeria eliminated primary school fees, opening doors to groups who had never before attended a government school – the very poor, Muslims, girls. Between 1955 and 1960, the Nigerian primary school enrollment spiked 142%.²⁶

²⁵ For a history of the noble savage stereotype, see Christopher Fox, "Introduction: How to Prepare a Noble Savage: The Spectacle of Human Science" in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth Century Domains* (University of California Press, 1995). Megan Vaughan's "Madman and the Medicine Men: Colonial Psychiatry and the Theory of Deculturation" is in *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Cambridge, 1991). For the importance of literacy to the Puritans, see Jill Lepore, "Dead Men Tell No Tales: John Sassamon and the Fatal Consequences of Literacy," *American Quarterly* 46 (Dec 1994): 479-512.

²⁶ L. J. Lewis, "Education and Political Independence in Africa," *Comparative Education Review* 5 1 (June 1961):40.

Ironically, even the most recalcitrant colonial bureaucrats were eager to develop educational infrastructure in Nigeria, particularly universities. Bureaucrats expected that if Nigerian schools existed, young African students would no longer need to go study in the United States where, often enough, they became radicalized. How much better would it be, the bureaucrats reasoned, if they could control who taught what to whom.

Indeed, the colonial bureaucrats had a lot to be afraid of. Race and education policy in 1950s and 60s America was a precarious tinderbox. School segregation was fiercely debated in the courts, in the schools, and on newspaper front pages. Thurgood Marshall argued in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and 1955. The National Guard barred nine black students entry to the Little Rock High School in 1957. A black student named James Meredith sparked controversy after enrolling at the University of Mississippi in 1962. The American hesitation to allow blacks into ‘whites-only’ schools created a generation of African-American intellectuals, among them Malcolm X, who glorified the importance of literacy. From his autobiography: “... as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying ... I never had been so truly free in my life.” For Malcolm X, as for many others, literacy meant more than just being able to read.²⁷

In Britain, Nigeria, Kenya, and America as well, independence seemed to hinge on the ‘educability’ of the mythical African mind. The question got framed

²⁷ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Ballantine Books, 1965): 172. The list of events I culled from Catherine Prendergast’s 2003 book *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. In the book, she argues that educational research, policy and discussion around literacy was and remains “recruited to maintain a system of racial inequality and discrimination.”

as: are Africans – and African-Americans - capable of transforming from subjects into citizens? In this debate, literacy became shorthand for freedom itself.

In this light, Prince's diagnosis reads differently. He wrote in his original article: "This syndrome may be looked upon as an unconscious rejection of the [Nigerian] education system." Carothers, too, made a similar claim about brain fag: "The present writer ... would indeed see this syndrome as an expression of a subconscious antagonism to the written word and all it stands for..." McLuhan cited Carothers when he wrote, "The African will remain in permanent servitude unless ... [he] build[s] up his character again but with a totally different mentality ..." that is, a literate one. In a strong sense, then, the mid-20th-century construction of 'the great divide' can be attributed to these colonial psychiatrists' recalcitrance, to their need to pathologize that which threatened them: political independence.

Abeokuta, Nigeria, circa 1953. A young Nigerian man known for his "sharp suit [and] dark glasses" graduated from the University College, Ibadan. His undergraduate degree was in English, History, and Theology. Five years later, an obscure British publishing house published his first novel, without "touch[ing] a word of it." Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* would sell more than eight million copies around the world, and be translated into more than 50 languages. ²⁸

After his own success, Achebe ushered other Nigerian writers, most Ibadan alumni from between 1950 and 1960, into prominence: poet Christopher Okigbo, class of 1955; novelist Elechi Amadi, class of 1959; playwright John

²⁸ Details, figures and quotations from this paragraph and the two that follow it are from Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (Indiana University Press, 1997). In particular, see chapter 4: "The Young Man in Our Hall" and chapter 7: "Striding to the Frontier."

Pepper Clark, class of 1960. A representative from Achebe's publisher, Alan Hill, wrote "The fantastic sales of his own books, selling by the million, provided the basis for the rest of the series." On a parallel track, playwright Wole Soyinka who graduated from Ibadan in 1954, found spectacular success on London's stages. In 1986, Soyinka received the Nobel Prize for Literature. How fitting that in the very same place and at the very same time as Raymond Prince doubted Nigerians' potential for literacy, a generation of Nigerian students dazzled the world with their poetry and prose.

Of all of these writers, Achebe continues to be the most read. Among his most widely cited pieces of writing is his 1975 critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, titled "An Image of Africa." The essay denounces "the desire -- one might indeed say the need -- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Achebe diagnosed psychology itself. So long as Western experts divided the world into two unequal halves, he seemed to argue, Africans would always come up short.²⁹

Enter Nigerian psychiatrist Oyedemi Ayonrinde.

In 1994, the fourth incarnation of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) – known as the Bible of psychiatry – included a new category of diseases known as 'Culture-Bound Syndromes.' This category was meant to cover diseases that occur only in certain cultures. Prince was

²⁹ From Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977). Available online here: <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>

instrumental in creating this category, heralding 'brain fag' as an archetypal case.³⁰

With the next revision of the DSM currently underway (its publication slated for 2013), Dr. Ayonrinde has formally lodged a protest. In a 2008 speech to the Royal College of Pharmacists, Ayonrinde argued, "The culture-bound syndromes are colorful and exotic ... but all were described a long time ago in a colonial context ... We are in 2008 and need to ask ourselves if culture-bound syndromes are relevant to modern day psychiatry." He proceeded to make a tricky but trenchant critique of brain fag.³¹

Ayonrinde's critique is an historical one. It turns out that neither Prince, nor his Nigerian students actually coined the term 'brain fag.' Long before Prince's first paper, "brain fag" – along with 'nerve fag' and 'nervous exhaustion' - existed as a familiar synonym for George Beard's late 19th century diagnosis of neurasthenia. Sharing almost identical symptoms as its Nigerian counterpart, this earlier condition was described by the *New York Times* in 1903 as "due to nervous disorder brought on by muscular eye strain." In fact, between about 1890 and 1920, 'brain fag' was a household term in England and America. The *Chicago Tribune* called 'brain fag,' in 1903, "the disease of the century." (In 1900, the chief engineer at Stanford University even invented an electric hairbrush "for the use of students who are suffering from brain fag.") One presumes that American or English missionaries brought the term with them at some point in

³⁰ See Raymond Prince, "The Concept of Culture-Bound Syndromes: Anorexia Nervosa and Brain-Fag," *Social Science & Medicine* 21 2 (1985): 197-203.

³¹ Oyedeji Ayonrinde, "Editorial: Brain Fag Syndrome: New Wine in Old Bottles or Old Wine in New Bottles?" *Nigerian Journal of Psychiatry* 6 2 (2008): 47-50.
See also: "Stressed-out West African Students: Psychiatrists Claim 'Brain-Fag' Outdated" Press Release issued July 2, 2008 by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Online: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/press/pressreleases2008/bank2008/amfag.aspx>
Also notable is Ayonrinde's 2009 dissertation titled, "A History of 'Brain Fag' in the 19th and 20th Century."

the first half of the 20th century, whereupon Nigerian students used the term to explain their own ailments.³²

Ayonrinde took his critique a step further. Beard's diagnosis was also known by a term coined by one of its sufferers, William James. James called it 'American-itis,' believing that Americans were most susceptible. If 'brain fag' is culture-bound at all, Ayonrinde pointed out, shouldn't it be culture bound to England or America as opposed to Nigeria?³³

Ayonrinde, Achebe and others exposed (and continue to expose) the fallacies of the 'great divide.' These Nigerian thinkers – with their identities, with their words, with their actions – freed their fields from colonial psychiatry's simplistic dichotomies and veiled cultural judgments. They committed the most subversive act of all: they asserted their own existence. They penned a declaration to the so-called 'literate' world. *I exist! So stop diagnosing me with your own insecurities.*

³² Herbert L Towle, "Letter to the Editor: 'Brain Fag' Due to Eye Strain" *New York Times* (Dec 27, 1903): 21. "Brain Fag Racing Here" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Nov 17, 1903): 7. "Electricity for Brain Fag" *The Baltimore Sun* (July 24, 1900): 8.

³³ See Robert D. Richardson, *William James: in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006): 311.